Issues and challenges in communicating

With Less Literate Canadians

To discover

To understand

To use

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Canada Information Office
September 2000

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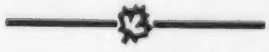

Acknowledgements

This study on government communications with less literate Canadians was initiated and directed by the Canada Information Office as part of its mandate to improve communications between the Government of Canada and Canadians. For this purpose, the Canada Information Office works with other government departments and agencies to inform Canadians about the government services available to them. In conducting projects such as this one, the Canada Information Office strives to promote sustained improvement in government communications as well as support and advise government communicators by making available the results of citizen-based research.

This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of Canadians who responded to the survey and participated in the interviews. We wish to thank them. We would also like to stress the exceptional contribution of many departments and governmental agencies, as well as that of public opinion research companies. We would like to thank everyone who, in one way or another, was involved in this project. In particular, we would like to thank Ms. Marla Waltman Daschko from the National Literacy Secretariat, Mr. Michel Gauthier from Human Resources Development Canada, Mr. Jean Pignal and Ms. Lynn Barr-Telford from Statistics Canada, and Ms. Céline Brisebois, Ms. Faye Linseman and Ms. Karen Suchorab from the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency. Special thanks go to Mr. Martial Ménard who was involved in the early stages of this study. For performing the quantitative and qualitative studies, special thanks also go to Mr. Duncan McKie from Pollara, Mr. Yves Déziel and Mr. Kerry Butt, both from COGEM, and their colleagues.

Finally, it is also important to highlight the collaboration of Ms. Wendy Desbrisay of the Movement for Canadian Literacy, as well as Ms. Luce Lapierre, from the *Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français*, and their colleagues.

Summary

Since its creation in 1996, the Canada Information Office has launched various public opinion research and analysis projects related to government communications. During the course of these projects, many communication challenges facing various segments of Canada's population were identified. Given its awareness of the particular situation of less literate Canadians, the Canada Information Office undertook, in the spring of 1999, an analysis of the various sources of information concerning this important group within society. At the beginning of 2000, the Canada Information Office researched aspects of public opinion regarding this group. The main results of the research are presented in this report and were discussed with Government of Canada representatives of the communication sector during a session held in June 2000.

In brief, less literate Canadians represent a major challenge for the government communications community, both in terms of communication approaches for the general public, as well as the promotion of specific services by various government departments or agencies. The main results, obtained from the national survey of less educated Canadians conducted in February 2000, are as follows:

- Unfamiliar with the services and initiatives taken by the Government of Canada, this group wishes to be informed not only about issues they consider priorities (health care, employment and education), but also about matters which are important to them in their everyday lives (health care, hospitals, doctors, aging, pensions, etc.). They are relatively pessimistic about their future and critical of government.

- Television is their main source of information, especially in the evening. Others prefer the radio, especially in the morning. They do not spend much time reading newspapers.

- While they have very little interaction with the Government of Canada, a significant number of them call upon a relative or friend to communicate with government on their behalf.

- When they do choose to contact the Government of Canada themselves, they prefer direct contact with one of its representatives, mostly by telephone. Not many of them wish to be informed through automated systems (kiosk or telephone) or through the Internet.

- In general, they consider that the information they receive is difficult to understand and that it does not respond to their needs. Many of them believe that they cannot totally rely on the information transmitted.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LESS EDUCATED CANADIANS
Summary of Findings

General Considerations

- They are less optimistic, less self-confident and find change difficult.
- They are critical of government performance.

Information Needs

- They want to be informed, but are not always sure about what.
- They have the same priorities as other Canadians, that is, health care, education and unemployment, but they are not familiar with initiatives that have already been taken.
- They are more focussed on day-to-day concerns.

Perceptions Relating to Government Communications

- They have greater difficulty understanding information and recognizing information sources.
- They are ambivalent about whether the information they receive meets their needs.
- They are uncertain about whether they can fully rely on the information conveyed.
- They contact the Government of Canada less frequently.
- They rely heavily on others to obtain information (relatives, friends, professionals).

Communications Vehicles

- They watch a lot of television which is their main source for all kinds of information, especially in the evenings.
- They are apprehensive about new developments in information technology, including the Internet.
- They want to be informed through government advertising, as much on television as in print.

At the qualitative level, less literate Canadians are very sensitive to the way information is made available to them. Participants in the interviews were asked to share their reactions to government advertising and to express their preferences. The main results are presented in the following table. These results should be used with caution, bearing in mind their limitations from a statistical standpoint.

Upon examining these findings, it appears that governments have not fully succeeded in transmitting easy-to-understand information that adequately meets the needs of less literate Canadians. More effort will have to be made to adapt government communications to the particular needs of this major segment of the population, so that they may take full advantage of the services available to them.

EXPECTATIONS REGARDING COMMUNICATIONS	
In its communications, the government gives too much importance to the following elements:	**In its communications, the government should give more importance to the following elements:**
General Considerations	
• Scientific explanations, analyses, reports, studies.	• Personal life experiences, practical examples (what is good and or bad).
• Themes, key words, generic name of programs.	• Information that is relevant and useful in their everyday lives.
Issues and Challenges	
• Generalizations, insisting on what may happen in the future.	• Immediate solutions applicable to real problems, evolving solutions with short term impact.
• Emphasis on new initiatives; solutions as opposed to results.	• Demonstrate how the solution corresponds to a real need, concern or aspiration in everyday life (result).
• References to written documents.	• Need for precise instructions (steps to follow) in order to accomplish the task they have been asked to do.
Format, Presentation	
• Difficult to understand: complex language, technical terms, acronyms, administrative jargon.	• Clear and simple language, words known and used by many people, clearly displayed information, large print.
• Modern computer graphics techniques, colour writing on white background.	• Black writing on a light/white background, an image with which they can identify is worth a thousand words.
• Voice of a public servant.	• Real-life situations, personal testimonials.
• The maximum information within the available space (quantity).	• Easily understandable information (quality as opposed to quantity).

For this purpose, after having studied the results, the participants of the information session held for federal communicators agreed on the importance of pursuing this initiative. They also agreed to exchange on acquired knowledge, lessons learned and better practices. Some representatives also insisted on the use of clear and simple language, the importance of better understanding how less literate Canadians approach, read and use information and the importance of selecting an appropriate mix of media.

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1 - Issues Related to Literacy in Canada

Definition of Literacy

Literacy is defined as the ability of individuals to use printed and written information to function in society, reach their objectives, broaden their knowledge and increase their potential[1]. This definition makes reference not only to the level of education, but also to the mode of behaviour requiring regular use of reading and writing skills to accomplish a task. There are some major challenges for government communications in such a context. Written materials are everywhere: information leaflets, forms, Internet sites, media articles on government activities, and advertising. In addition, visual information is often based on written texts, and understanding them often calls upon the logic of the written word.

The most comprehensive and most recent literacy data, published by Statistics Canada in September 1996, clearly demonstrates how serious these challenges are[2].

- **48% of Canadians aged 16 years and over** (10.2 million individuals) **have difficulty understanding and using information** contained in texts such as editorials, articles, and instructions - for example, the use of medication (narrative texts).

- 47% of Canadians aged 16 years and over have difficulty extracting and using information presented in various forms, notably job applications, transportation schedules, road maps, tables and graphs (schematic texts).

- 48% of Canadians aged 16 years and over do not have the knowledge or necessary abilities to perform math problems based on printed documents, for example, to calculate a tip or the amount of interest on a loan from information in an ad (texts with quantitative content).

Among Canadians who have difficulty extracting, understanding, and using the information they receive, there are significant differences suggesting that **even within these groups our approach in the area of communication should be further targeted**, adapted to intended groups using appropriate communication tools.

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[1] *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*, by Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat, September 1996.

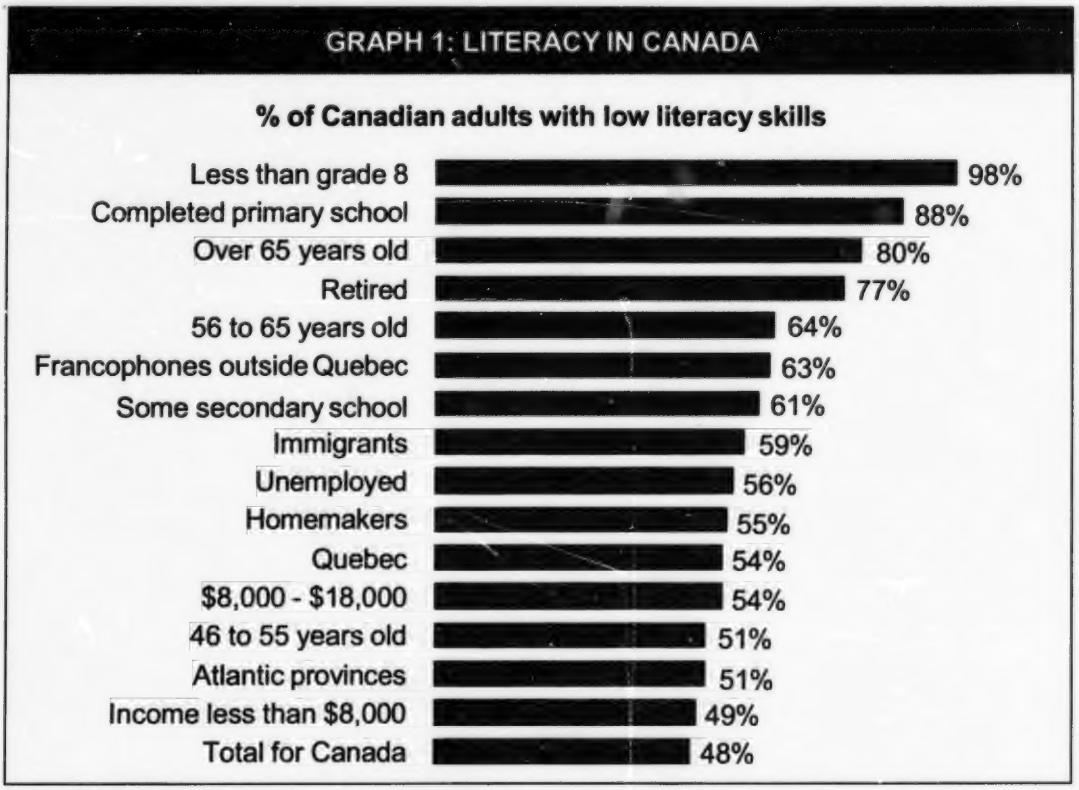
[2] For more details on the results of this study see Appendix A.

Socio-economic Characteristics

Canadians who have difficulty reading and writing can be found in all demographic and socio-economic groups, without exception. They are present, therefore, to varying degrees, in all client groups. Contrary to popular belief, literacy problems do not affect only the less educated, the poor, or the marginalised.

This being said, **the proportion of less literate people is higher** in some population groups (Graph 1). This is the case among **citizens above the age of 56; people with less than a grade 9 education; retired people, homemakers or the unemployed; low-income individuals; and immigrants**. By province, the proportion of less literate people is higher than the Canadian average in Quebec, the Atlantic region, and among Francophones outside Quebec.

GRAPH 1: LITERACY IN CANADA



Source : *Reading the Future : A Portrait of Literacy in Canada,*
Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat (September 1996)

Description of the Study

Objectives

As part of its mandate to improve communications between the Government of Canada and its citizens, the Canada Information Office investigated the serious challenges posed by the issue of literacy in Canada. The main objective of the present study is to improve our knowledge of this significant segment of the Canadian population within the context of a communications approach for the general public and the services intended for specific clienteles. Beyond the general context of government communications, we asked less literate Canadians about their information needs and about the ways in which they interact with the Government of Canada, their assessment of government communications, and their usage and preferences among various vehicles of communication. Finally, based on case studies, we drew out various key elements regarding the content of government communications.

To achieve our objective, we used a variety of quantitative and qualitative analysis tools, as well as several works on the subject, notably:

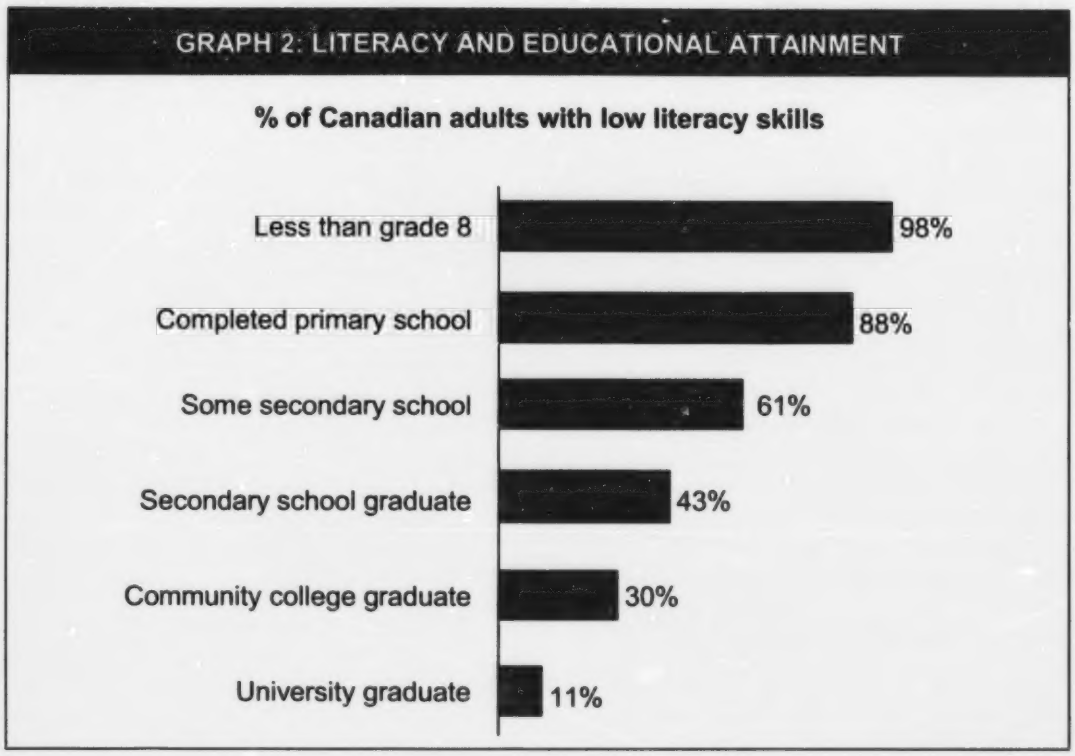
- A **national survey** of 1,003 less educated Canadians, conducted by Pollara between January 7 and February 2, 2000, including a pre-test of the survey with eight discussion groups;
- **Quarterly surveys** on government communications conducted among 4,000 Canadians, undertaken by Ekos for the Canada Information Office between October 1998 and February 2000; and
- **Individual interviews** with 46 less literate Canadians, conducted by COGEM in May 2000.

National Survey

Given the major difficulties in identifying and reaching less literate people (as defined by Statistics Canada) through a telephone survey, sampling in the national survey was limited to less educated Canadians, those with less than a grade 9 education.

As demonstrated in Graph 2, the work by Statistics Canada shows a close connection between the level of education of Canadians and their understanding of written material. For example, 98% of those who did not complete the 8th grade, and 88% of those who only completed the 8th grade, have serious reading difficulties.

GRAPH 2: LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



Source : *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada,*
Statistics Canada. Human Resources Development Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat (September 1996)

The Canada Information Office's[3] national survey of less educated Canadians was conducted among 1,003 adult respondents with less than a grade 9 education (42% not having completed grade 8, 58% having completed grade 8). Among all respondents, there was an almost equal proportion of men (49%) and women (51%). One respondent out of two was 65 years of age or over, one third (31 %) between 50 and 64 years of age, and one out of five (19 %) was 49 years of age or less. That the proportion of elderly people is relatively important is borne out in work done by Statistics Canada (September 1996), which shows that 80 % of individuals over the age of 65 and 64% of those aged 56 to 65 have low levels of literacy (Graph 1).

[3]The margin of error for such a sample is +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20. The 15-minute survey contained more than 20 questions which were pre-tested with target population segments and in discussion groups (8 in total: 4 in Montreal and 4 in Halifax).

With regards to occupation, 23% of respondents were employed, 6% were unemployed or looking for a job, and 2% were studying. The others were retired (56%), reflecting the large proportion of elderly people, homemakers (9%), disabled, or in poor health (3%). As for their personal situation, more than one third of respondents lived alone (34%) or with a child (4%); others were couples with children (26%), couples without children (27%) or couples living together with another adult (5%). By household income, approximately three quarters of the households had an income below $40,000, while 6% had an income above $60,000.

Quarterly Surveys on Government Communications

Since October 1998, the Canada Information Office has conducted quarterly surveys on government communications. The main results of these studies are available on the Canada Information Office's Web site (www.cio-bic.gc.ca).

Unless otherwise indicated, the results in the present document were taken from the winter 2000 survey, conducted between February 1 and February 21. Of all survey respondents (more than 4,000 respondents), 160 stated they had less than a grade 9 education[4]. The margin of error for such a sub-sample is more than 8%, so the results must be used with caution. In general, we did not use the results that were significantly different from the national average.

Interviews

The interviews made it possible to further examine the results obtained from the quantitative analysis, notably regarding the habits and realities of this population group in both their choice and use of information. These interviews, combined with the results of other recent studies, also made it possible to evaluate the perceptions that less literate Canadians have of certain government advertisements, particularly in terms of information (language, text structure, format and colour).

The interviews targeted citizens enrolled in literacy programs[5]. It is important to note that these individuals are rarely found in the most illiterate groups and are perhaps less isolated than others.

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[4]These results may seem low (less than 5% of the sampling). According to Statistics Canada, in 1996, the percentage of Canadians with less than a grade 9 education was nearly 12%. Experience shows that this population group tends to overestimate its level of education when responding to a survey.

[5]In this regard, we would like to thank the organizations that received us and organized the interviews, in collaboration with COGEM.

2 - General Context

Perspectives

The results of our various government communications surveys conducted since October 1998 have shown that less educated Canadians are in general **less optimistic and have difficulty adapting to change.** The results from fall 1999 reveal that:

- 56% of less educated respondents said they were optimistic, compared to 77% for the population as a whole. At the same time, 17% responded that they were pessimistic in comparison to the national average of 9%;

- less educated Canadians are more prone to believe they have lost all control over their economic future (40% versus the national average of 30[6]);

- more than 75% of less educated respondents feel that the world around them is changing so quickly they have a hard time keeping up (47% for the population as a whole).

The results confirm those obtained in a study conducted in May 1997 by COGEM[6] for Revenue Canada, which suggest that less literate Canadians **often avoid any new or different situations**.

Perceptions of Governments

According to the results of the national survey of less educated Canadians and the quarterly surveys on government communications, this group is **critical of government performance.**

- Less than one third of less educated Canadians (30%) consider the general performance of the Government of Canada good.

- In the quarterly government communications survey conducted during the winter of 2000, 40% of Canadians considered the performance of the Government of Canada good. The corresponding percentage was only 35% among less educated respondents. Similar trends were obtained for provincial governments.

- Less educated Canadians are less prone to believe that the Government of Canada is moving in the right direction (47% in the government communications survey of the winter of 2000 versus 56% for all respondents).

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[6] *Besoins d'information et stratégies des Canadiens ayant un faible niveau d'alphabétisme*, by COGEM for Revenue Canada, May 1997.

During the interviews conducted in May 2000, participants indicated that they make little distinction between the various levels of government. They associate them to a larger extent with politicians rather than available government program and services.

Priorities and Concerns

Investing in the health care system is by far the most important government priority identified by less educated Canadians (Table 1). Ranked second are priorities directly associated with improving the quality of life: reducing unemployment, poverty, and taxes.

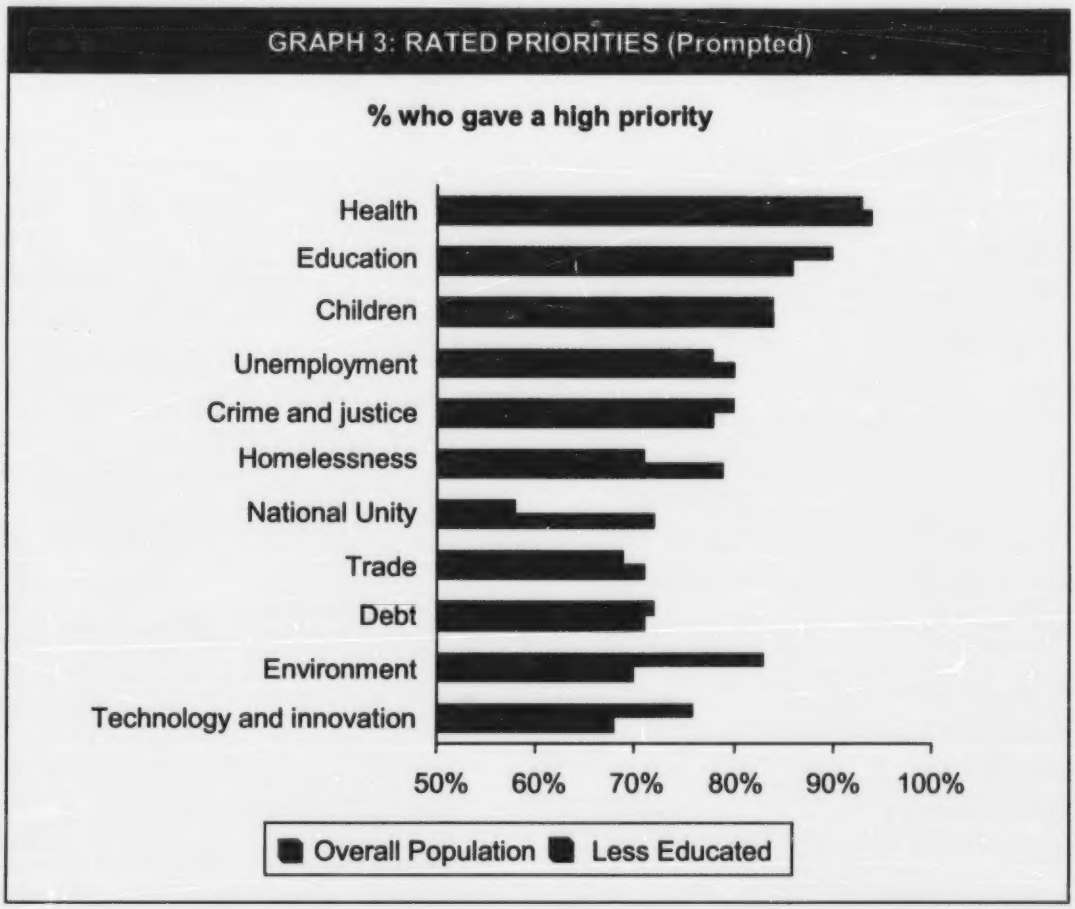
TABLE 1: GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

"When you think about the problems facing Canada today, what do you think the Government of Canada's priority should be?"	**As Percentage of Total Number of Respondents**
Investing in the health care system	18%
Reducing unemployment/Creating jobs	9%
Reducing poverty	7%
Reducing taxes	5%
Immigration	4%
National unity	3%
Reducing the public debt	3%
Investing in education	3%
Ensuring the well-being of Canadians	2%
Helping the homeless	2%
Others	19%
Don't know/No answer	25%
Total	100%

Source: National Survey of Less Educated Canadians, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

All Canadians essentially share the same order of priorities (Graph 3)[7]. However, a higher proportion of less educated individuals are of the opinion that the Government of Canada should give **a high priority to national unity and homelessness**, reflecting perhaps a higher level of uncertainty regarding their own future and that of the country. On the other hand, a smaller number of less educated Canadians consider that the Government of Canada should give high priority to the environment and to technology and innovation, issues that appear to preoccupy them less.

GRAPH 3: RATED PRIORITIES (Prompted)



Source: *Quarterly Survey on Government Communications*, Canada Information Office, Winter 2000.

[7]These results are different from the previous ones in that Canadians were asked about a given set of priorities for the next five years. Table 1 refers to an unprompted question (with only one answer) on today's priorities.

3 - Information Requirements

Needs

Less educated Canadians **want to be informed by the Government of Canada** (Table 2), not only about issues that are a priority for them (health care, education and employment) but also on situations that are relevant to their everyday lives (health care, hospital issues, doctors, pensions, aging, GST, seniors' issues, government spending and social programs to name but a few). These results, which focus on everyday life, were corroborated by the interviews conducted in May 2000.

TABLE 2: INFORMATION NEEDS

"What particular subjects would you like to receive information about from the Government of Canada?" (unprompted)	**As Percentage of Total Number of Respondents**
Health care system/Hospital issues/Doctors	11%
Pensions/Old Age/Disability/Widow	9%
Taxes/Income tax/GST	9%
Seniors issues	6%
Government spending/Budget/Deficit	5%
Education	3%
Employment/Unemployment	3%
Social programs/Poverty/Homelessness/Well being	3%
Nothing/Receive enough	14%
Don't know/No answer	36%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

It should be noted in the previous table that just over one respondent out of ten receives enough information from the Government of Canada. **More than one out of three, however, do not know or cannot identify their needs in terms of information.** In this regard, during the interviews, participants expressed little interest in taking the steps necessary to be informed. For many of them, that is the government's responsibility.

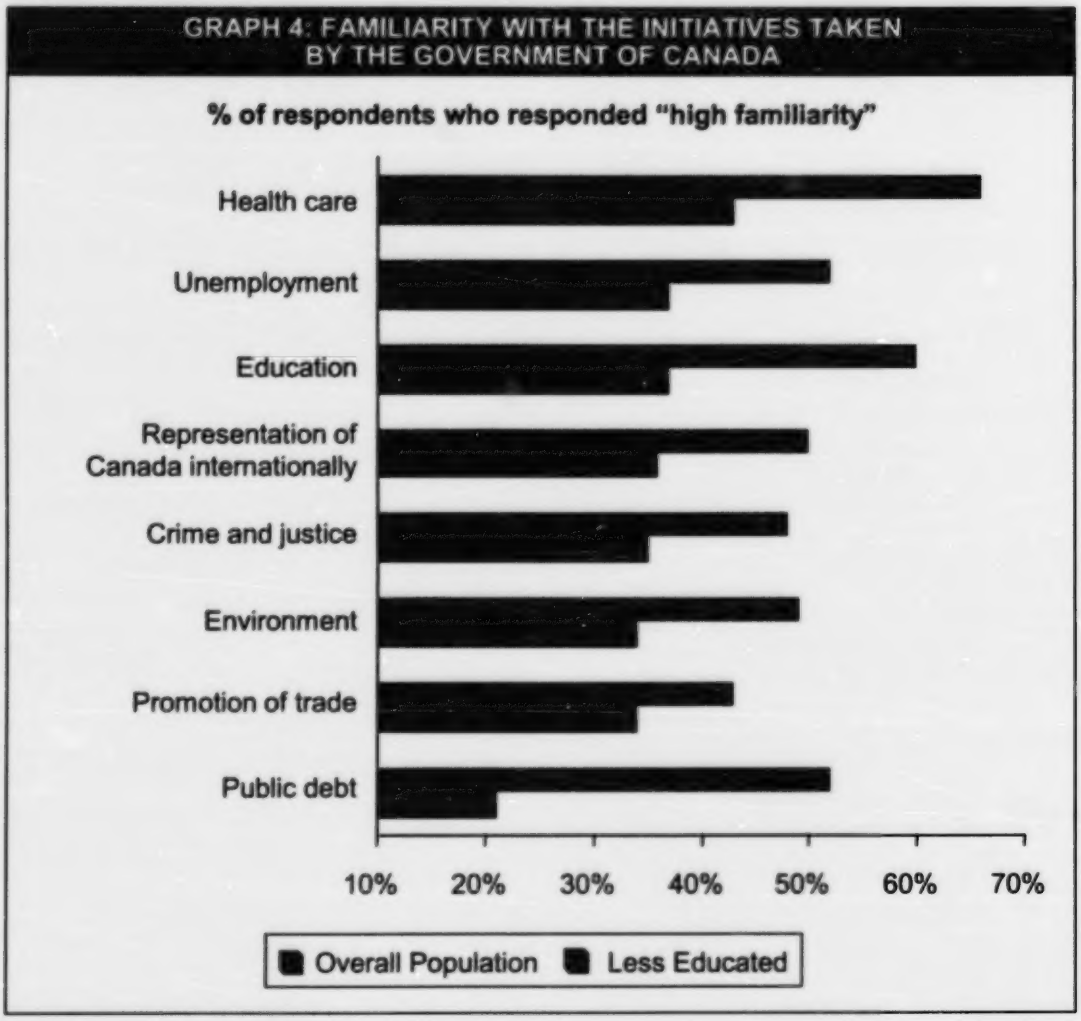
« Quand ils changent une loi sur l'allocation, le chômage, les autres affaires comme ça,ils devraient l'expliquer, envoyer une lettre, le dire à la TV... »

« They know where I am, if they want to tell me anything. »

Familiarity with Government initiatives

Less educated Canadians are **much less familiar with the initiatives taken by the Government of Canada** (Graph 4) in various priority areas. This is especially true of issues that concern them the most (health care, education, employment).

GRAPH 4: FAMILIARITY WITH THE INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA



Source: *Quarterly Survey on Government Communications*, Canada Information Office, Fall 1999.

Interaction with the Government of Canada

The national survey of less educated Canadians showed that only one respondent out of four communicated with the Government of Canada within the last year[8]. Interviews conducted in May 2000 indicated that less literate Canadians are **not very enthusiastic when faced with the prospect of contacting government, and perceived these communications as being synonymous with difficulties.**

Asked about the means used to contact the Government of Canada, **a very clear majority used the telephone** (Table 3). Less than half visited a government office in person. About one third used the mail. Very few respondents communicated via the Internet or used an automated information booth in a public place.

TABLE 3: POINTS OF CONTACT WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

"Did you contact the Government of Canada by...?"	**Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "*Yes*"**
Telephone	81%
Visiting a government office	41%
Mail	30%
Internet	5%
Automated information booth in public place	5%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

These findings are all the more important in light of a topic that arose repeatedly during the focus groups held as part of the survey questionnaire design phase[9]. In these groups, numerous participants voiced their frustration with using the telephone. During the interviews held in May 2000, a few participants also expressed their frustration with the telephone service. The nature of their frustration was primarily associated with frequent transfers from one service to another, long periods of time spent waiting on hold, and no knowledge as to who they were speaking with. The quarterly surveys on government communications have demonstrated the close links that exist between the quality of service delivery and Canadians' assessments of government performance. The service-performance correlation is evident for the population as a whole.

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[8]This result is slightly lower than the corresponding number for the population as a whole (36%) obtained in the Quarterly Survey on Government Communications in the Winter of 2000.

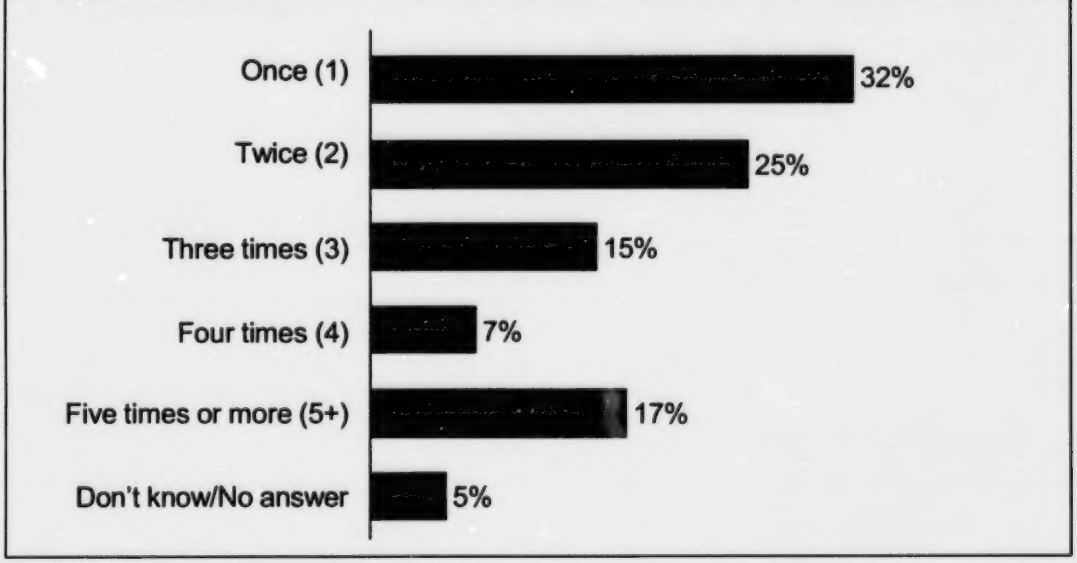
[9]The focus groups were conducted by Patterson, Langlois Consultants Inc. in September 1999.

The results also suggest that they **prefer direct contact with a representative.** A very clear majority of both respondents who communicated by telephone (90 %) and respondents who visited an office (92 %) spoke to or met an agent. Moreover, a very clear majority of participants replied that the way they chose to obtain information **permitted them to obtain the desired information** (90% of those who visited a government office, 86% of those who used the telephone and 79% of those who used the mail)[10].

More than half of respondents (57%) said they had communicated once or twice with the government (Graph 5). Interviewed on their use of the telephone, certain participants indicated that they called repeatedly to confirm the information obtained the first time or to obtain a desired answer. A few will go so far as to take note of the agent's name in the hope of always communicating with the same person. This is the case regardless of the nature of information sought or the level of government responsible. The same is true for their visits to a government office or information desk, preferably the one they usually go to.

« Je choisis la personne qui va m'aider. Je sais à qui demander et à qui je ne demanderai pas. »

GRAPH 5: FREQUENCY OF CONTACTS WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA



Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

[10]The results for information obtained via the Internet or from automated information booths are not statistically significant because of a very small number of individuals who communicated in this way.

Future Preferences

When faced with the hypothetical need of communicating with the Government of Canada the next day for whatever reason, 69% of respondents in the national survey of less educated Canadians indicated that they would use the telephone, 12% would visit a government office[11] and 11% would use the mail. Very few respondents said they would communicate with the Government of Canada using the Internet (2%) or an automated information booth (1%).

Regarding the Internet, the results from the quarterly government communications survey of winter 2000 showed that **85% of the less educated respondents did not use the Internet, at home or elsewhere, within the previous three months, compared to only 38% of the population as a whole.** The results of the quarterly surveys on government communications show that this education gap is more significant than gaps engendered by other variables (sex, age, rural versus urban). Nonetheless, the number of Internet users among less educated Canadians has climbed significantly since May 1999, as it has for the population as a whole.

Relay of Information

Among those who did not communicate with the Government of Canada (76% of respondents), about 10% indicated that someone else communicated with the Government of Canada on their behalf (Table 4). This person was very often a family member (52%): either a child, their spouse or another member of the family. About one third made use of a professional, such as an accountant or a lawyer. About one out of ten respondents asked a friend to help them.

[11] Some participants in the interviews, especially in rural communities, indicated that they would not visit a government office because of the distance involved.

TABLE 4: LIST OF PERSONS WHO COMMUNICATE WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA ON BEHALF OF LESS EDUCATED CANADIANS	
"Who usually does that for you?"	**As Percentage of Number of Respondents**
Accountant	24%
Child	20%
Other family member	17%
Spouse	15%
Friend	9%
Lawyer	4%
Other	11%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*,
Canada Information Office, February 2000.

According to the study conducted for Revenue Canada (May 1997), the practice of relying on a third person is particularly common among less literate individuals who experience a new or different situation. Others simply avoid such situations. Interviews conducted in May 2000 indicated that less educated persons operate on the basis of their immediate network, where the relationship of trust is already tried and true. **In such a context, it is important to also inform the person who plays the role of intermediary.**[12] Reliance on family and friends, who are generally aware of their family member's or friend's literacy problems, is most pronounced among the less literate participants. For those who are frequent television viewers, particularly among Francophones, the network of trust extends to television show hosts they can count on.

« Lui, il est franc, il dit ce qu'il pense. Il a une sagesse et il défend les personnes... »

« Il parle comme le monde ordinaire. Quand il dit et explique quelque chose, on comprend ce qu'il veut dire. On a l'impression qu'il parle des vraies affaires, les affaires qui touchent le monde. »

[12]In a study published by the Canadian Adult Education Institute in 1997, entitled *Des services publics pour toute la population*, the chair of the *Régie des rentes du Québec* pointed out that in cases where the individuals who are asked to help do not understand either, it should not be surprising that these citizens lose confidence in the government.

4 - Evaluation of Government Communications

Various components of government communications (relevance, adequacy, ease of understanding, reliability and recognition) were evaluated. The results of the quarterly surveys on government communications suggest that, in comparison with the population as a whole, less educated citizens generally have **more difficulty understanding information and recognizing its origin.** They are also **more uncertain as to the relevance of the information in relation to their needs.**

Relevance

A significant proportion of less educated Canadians are ambivalent regarding the relevance of the information transmitted, with a large number responding that the information meets their needs more or less (Table 5). For about one in three respondents, the information meets their needs not at all or not really. One in five respondents appears to be satisfied with the information, either a lot or totally.

TABLE 5: RELEVANCE OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

"In general, do you think that the information the Government of Canada gives meets your needs totally, a lot, more or less, not really or not at all?"	**As Percentage of Total**
Totally	8%
A lot	9%
More or less	42%
Not really	20%
Not at all	10%
Don't know / No answer	11%
Total	100%

Source: National Survey of Less Educated Canadians,
Canada Information Office, February 2000.

When asked in the interviews about what "meeting to their needs" could actually mean, participants highlighted the importance of communicating government initiatives based on concrete solutions or results for their personal life experiences (for example, hospital waiting lists, the high costs of medication, insufficient social security benefits, job discrimination). Certain participants emphasized that some government information sought to placate them rather than respond to their everyday problems.

« *Oui, oui la santé, les emplois, l'entrepreneurship, tout va bien, on s'en occupe* »

Some pointed out that the information provided was simply out of touch with what they were seeing or hearing around them. For others, the information was too general and provided only the general thrust of the objective in question.

« *They never say how it's going to affect me and my kids.* »

Adequacy

The opinions of less educated Canadians on this issue are divided (Table 6). While 43% find that the Government of Canada gives enough or a lot of information about programs and services that are of interest to them, 44% find that it gives them not enough or none.

TABLE 6: ADEQUACY OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION	
"According to you, is the Government of Canada giving you too much, a lot, enough, not enough, or no information about the programs and services of interest to you?"	**As Percentage of Total**
Too much	0%
A lot	2%
Enough	41%
Not enough	36%
None	8%
Don't know/No answer	13%
Total	100%

Source: National Survey of Less Educated Canadians, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

During the interviews, some participants indicated having already heard of a subject that interested them (during a television newscast, for example), but said that no information was subsequently transmitted to them. Others simply stated:

« *On reçoit rien du gouvernement, à part des comptes* »

« *I see other people get stuff from the government, but I never hear anything about it.*»

Ease of Understanding

More than four respondents out of ten find that information provided by the Government of Canada is rather difficult or very difficult to understand (Table 7). Nearly one respondent out of five find that information provided by the Government of Canada is somewhat easy to understand. About one third of respondents find that the information from the Government of Canada is easy or very easy to understand.

TABLE 7: UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION	
"In general, do you think the information that the Government of Canada gives is very easy, easy, somewhat easy, difficult, or very difficult to understand?"	**As Percentage of Total**
Very easy	4%
Easy	26%
Somewhat easy	19%
Difficult	32%
Very difficult	11%
Don't know / No answer	8%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*,
Canada Information Office, February 2000.

The results of interviews suggest that the information was difficult to understand not only in terms of the vocabulary and the meaning of words, but also in terms of extracting relevant information or using it.

« *Quand je reçois des informations je ne sais pas toujours quoi faire, c'est compliqué.* »

« *Talk is cheap; they have to show me.* »

Reliability

More than one third of respondents consider that they can more or less rely on the information provided by the Government of Canada (Table 8). While one third, when asked if they think they can rely on the information, said not really or not at all, one respondent out of five believed that the information from the Government of Canada is very or totally reliable .

TABLE 8: RELIABILITY OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION	
"Do you think that you can rely totally, very, more or less, not really or not at all on the information that the Government of Canada gives?"	**As Percentage of Total**
Totally	7%
Very	12%
More or less	36%
Not really	21%
Not at all	12%
Don't know/No answer	12%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

In this regard, the participants in the interviews pointed out that they do not rely on information concerning them until actual proof is given. This generally means when an immediate advantage presents itself (for example, an increase in family allowances). Others indicated that they rely more on information when it refers to real cases or real life experiences similar to their own situation. Drawing similarities with individual life experiences makes information not only easier to understand, but also serves as a mechanism of proof.

« *Si j'ai des doutes, je veux des preuves à l'appui.* »

« *If my neighborhood benefits, well, that's ok, then.* »

Recognition

A significant number of less educated Canadians have difficulty knowing if an advertisement or a publication comes from the Government of Canada (Table 9). While four out of ten respondents usually, often or always know when an advertisement or a publication comes from the Government of Canada, the same proportion says they rarely or never know .

TABLE 9: RECOGNITION OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION	
"Do you always, often, usually, rarely or never know when an advertisement or a publication comes from the Government of Canada?"	**As Percentage of Total**
Always	12%
Often	10%
Usually	22%
Rarely	23%
Never	20%
Don't know / No answer	13%
Total	100 %

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

At the interviews, however, some participants rapidly identified the origin of the material presented, due notably to the Government of Canada logo and the 1 800 O-Canada phone number.

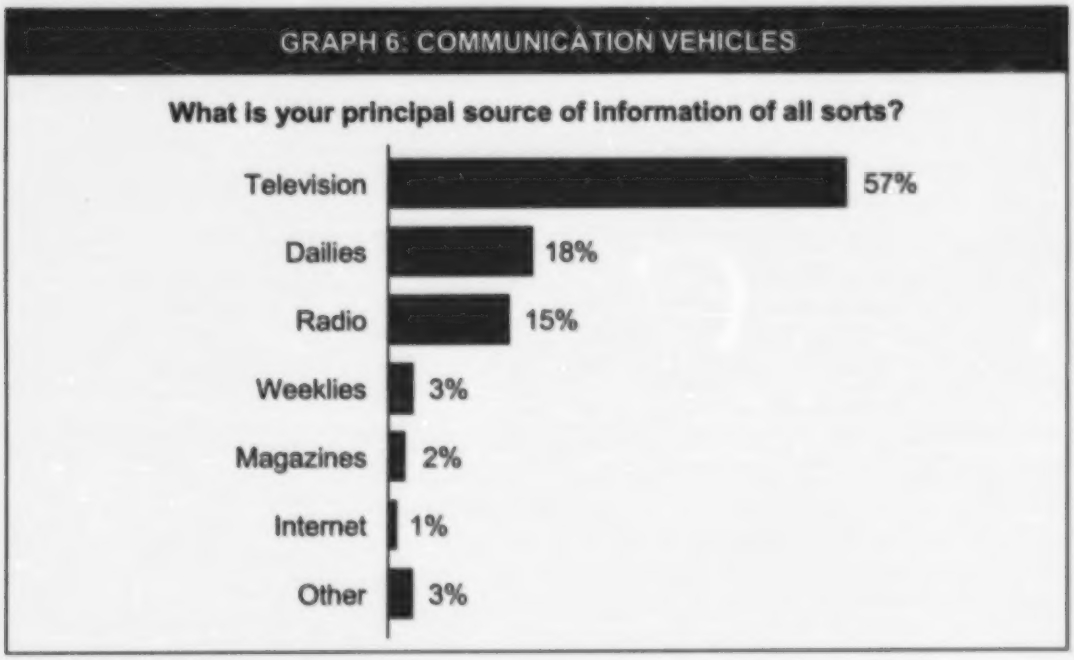
5 - Vehicles of Communication

Uses

More than half of less educated Canadians (57%) identified **television as their principal source of information of all sorts**, including information about the Government of Canada (Graph 6). Far behind are dailies[13] and radio, in proportions of 18% and 15% respectively. Women, low-income households (less than $20,000), rural residents and residents of the Atlantic provinces chose the radio as their principal source of information ahead of dailies. For a very small minority of respondents, weekly newspapers (3%), magazines (2%), and the Internet (1%) constitute the principal sources of information.

In comparison to the population as a whole (quarterly survey conducted in Fall 1999), less educated people **rely less on newspapers and depend more on television and radio.**

GRAPH 6: COMMUNICATION VEHICLES



Source: National Survey of Less Educated Canadians, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

[13]Their reading of newspapers remains relatively superficial.

TABLE 10: PRINCIPAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION BY REGION				
	Western Provinces	**Ontario**	**Quebec**	**Atlantic Provinces**
Television	54%	53%	69%	49%
Dailies	17%	21%	13%	19%
Radio	15%	16%	12%	23%
Weeklies	5%	2%	2%	4%
Magazines	2%	3%	2%	2%
All five sources mentioned above	1%	1%	1%	0%
Friends and/or family	1%	1%	0%	0%
Internet	1%	1%	0%	1%
Books	1%	0%	0%	0%
Don't know/No answer	3%	2%	1%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: National Survey of Less Educated Canadians, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

By region (Table 10), less educated Canadians in Quebec use television the most as a primary source of information. Residents of the Atlantic provinces use television the least. It is also in Quebec that less educated Canadians make less use of the written media as a primary source of information (17% compared to 23% for the country as a whole). Similar trends by province were obtained for the population as a whole in the quarterly surveys on government communications.

Less educated Francophones rely more on television (66% as opposed to 51% for Anglophones). Less educated women (63%) depend more on television as their primary source of information than do men (51%). Participants interviewed stated that televised newscasts were their principal source of information. Documentaries and public affairs programs were also considered informative.

There is also a significant relationship between the income level and the principal source of information for less educated Canadians (Table 11). The higher the family's income, the less they depend on television as a principal source of information and the more they use other sources, such as dailies, community newspapers and magazines.

TABLE 11: PRINCIPAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION BY LEVEL OF ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME

	$20,000 or less	Between $20,000 and $39,000	$40,000 or more
Television	60%	56%	46%
Radio	17%	14%	14%
Dailies	14%	21%	26%
Weeklies, magazines and other sources	6%	6%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

Preferences

When asked about the pertinence of the Government of Canada using various means of communication to provide information (Table 12), a significant proportion of less educated Canadians indicated that they **agree with advertising on television** (75%) **and in the written media** (76% for flyers sent by mail; 70% for advertising in weeklies; and 68% for advertising in dailies).

Regarding the mail, some participants in the interviews indicated that they preferred to receive information directly addressed to them. If the mail is evidently from the government (logo or name of government), it is automatically considered important. Some even added that when they consider this information to be relevant to them, they usually go in person to a government office to verify the accuracy of the information[14].

« *Quand c'est adressé, je fais plus attention, c'est pour moi.* »

« *When I see the (Canada) flag, I stop, that's important.* »

[14] In this regard, certain participants indicated always going to the same office, whose address they know, without making a distinction about the origin of the information.

Respondents aged 50 or more, as well as those from the Atlantic provinces, are more willing than others to obtain government information through radio advertisements. There are also more respondents from the Atlantic provinces who appreciate the concept of advertising in dailies, automated telephone services, and information booths at fairs and exhibitions. Displays in public places are better at attracting the interest of those employed.

TABLE 12: PREFERENCES IN TERMS OF VEHICLES OF COMMUNICATION

"How would you like the Government of Canada to give you information on the programs and services that interest you?"	**Percentage of Those who Answered "*Yes*"**
Publications or flyers sent by mail	76%
Advertising on television	75%
Advertising in community newspapers	70%
Advertising in daily newspapers	68%
Radio advertising	61%
Government offices near your home	57%
Displays in public places	55%
Information booths at fairs and exhibitions	44%
Advertising in magazines	40%
Automated telephone service	34%
Automated information booths in public places	32%
Internet	19%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

Only a small percentage of less educated Canadians wish to be informed via the Internet, automated booths or automated telephone services. The interviews showed that answering systems frustrate less literate people and further depersonalize the relationship of trust they seek to establish. Respondents are not so much against the idea of using new technologies themselves, but they feel uneasy or frightened when faced with "*a machine.*" They are afraid they would be unable to use it effectively and fail to obtain the desired information.

Some interviewees also find that television and radio ad campaigns are starting points (for example, the announcement of a new initiative) rather than arrival points in terms of the information they search for on an issue. Others believe that ad campaigns should be a means to obtain a quick answer to a simple question (for example, whether something is good or not).

Participants expressed a clear preference for advertising that is tailored to their individual needs and life experiences. They prefer messages using children or animals, or ones involving humorous scenarios. The participants expressed their frustrations with ads that, for informational purposes, attempt to transmit too much information in too little time (for example, viewers do not always have enough time to take down the telephone number in television ads). In contrast, some noted that you could count on an ad being repeated often enough to write down the information or to better understand it.

« *You have to watch them over and over, before you know what they are selling.* »

Television

Tuning In

Overall, respondents devote 3.6 hours a day to watching television, with more than two thirds spending three hours or more per day (16% are watching 6 hours or more per day). In comparison with the quarterly survey on government communications conducted in the winter of 1999, this is **more than the average for the population as a whole**.

TABLE 13: NUMBER OF HOURS PER DAY SPENT WATCHING TELEVISION	
	As Percentage of Total
None	3%
Less than one hour	2%
Between 1 and 1.5 hour	11%
Between 2 and 2.5 hours	20%
Between 3 and 3.5 hours	20%
Between 4 and 4.5 hours	16%
Between 5 and 5.5 hours	10%
6 hours or more	16%
Don't know/No answer	2%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

Among less educated Canadians who watch television, a strong majority (97%) watch mostly during the evening, about half of them (47%) watch television in the afternoon, and more than one third (37%) in the morning. Women are more likely than men to watch television in the morning and afternoon. Less educated Canadians from the Atlantic provinces watch television less in the morning than those from the rest of Canada.

When asked about tuning in to the local community channel, less educated Canadians replied that they devote little time to it, one hour a day on average (Table 14). Four out of ten do not watch this channel at all.

TABLE 14: NUMBER OF HOURS PER DAY SPENT WATCHING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY CHANNEL	
	As Percentage of Total
None	41%
Less than one hour	10%
Between 1 and 1.5 hour	17%
Between 2 and 2.5 hours	9%
Between 3 and 3.5 hours	4%
Between 4 and 4.5 hours	2%
5 hours or more	3%
Don't know/No answer	14%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

Other Considerations

Work by Statistics Canada (September 1996) regarding literacy showed a close link between reading skills and time spent watching television. The latter can be considered a substitute for newspapers among people unable to obtain the needed information from printed materials.

During the interviews, participants indicated that they generally watch television attentively, some in the company of a family member or a friend. Other participants pointed out that they occasionally discuss the content of television programs with their friends or relatives, not only for the sake of simply having a discussion, but also to verify their understanding of it.

> « *Quand j'entends quelque chose..., je vais vérifier souvent l'information auprès de mon amie, je lui demande si elle a entendu ça.* »

> « *If I hear something, I run to tell my friend in case she doesn't know.* »

Daily and Weekly Newspapers

By comparison to the television, less educated Canadians spend **relatively less time reading dailies** (Table 15), an average of 45 minutes a day[15]. It is even less for weeklies and magazines. Also of note is that 32% do not read dailies, 47% do not read weeklies, and 57% do not read magazines.

TABLE 15: NUMBER OF HOURS PER DAY SPENT READING NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

	Dailies	Weeklies	Magazines
None	32%	47%	57%
Less than one hour	24%	25%	14%
Between 1 and 1.5 hours	26%	14%	13%
Between 2 and 2.5 hours	9%	3%	8% (2 hrs. or more)
3 hours or more	3%	2%	---
Don't know/No answer	6%	9%	9%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

The literacy studies conducted by Statistics Canada (September 1996) showed significant differences in the way less literate Canadians read a newspaper, as compared to the rest of the population. Respondents with a higher degree of literacy are more likely to read certain sections than those with a lower degree of literacy - namely editorials, national and international news, literary and cinema columns, and financial news. The differences are not as great for the classifieds, sports, comic strips, television schedules, horoscopes, and practical advice.

[15]Pollara, which conducted the survey, considered that this level might be over-estimated considering the large number of other sources of information.

Participants in the interviews pointed out that they first flip through the pages of a newspaper (headlines and photographs). If a subject interests them they begin reading, but do not complete the entire article unless it truly pertains to their particular situation or interests. They are especially interested in local and community activities and do not linger over ads, unless they attract their attention or are of particular interest to them.

«Je regarde ce qui est écrit en gros et je lis ce qui m'intéresse.»

« I always scan the headlines.»

Radio

Tuning In

Less educated Canadians **spend less time listening to the radio than watching television.** They spend on average 2.4 hours a day listening to the radio (Table 16). It should be noted that half of the respondents listen to the radio 1.5 hours or less a day.

Among those who listen to the radio, 82% do so mostly in the morning, while 46% listen in during the afternoon, 38% in the evening, and 35% on their way to or from work. Men and respondents whose annual income is more than $40,000 are more likely to listen to the radio while commuting to and from work.

TABLE 16: NUMBER OF HOURS PER DAY SPENT LISTENING TO THE RADIO

	As Percentage of Total
None	18%
Less than one hour	12%
Between 1 and 1.5 hour	21%
Between 2 and 2.5 hours	17%
Between 3 and 3.5 hours	7%
Between 4 and 4.5 hours	6%
Between 5 and 5.5 hours	5%
6 hours or more	11%
Don't know/No answer	3%
Total	100%

Source: *National Survey of Less Educated Canadians*, Canada Information Office, February 2000.

Other Considerations

When asked about a recent government advertisement which was in the form of an information capsule, certain participants in the interviews quickly associated this form of communication (by radio) with reading text and, by extension, the related difficulties they generally face when presented with written materials. Indeed, participants found the information difficult to understand, too scientific, and oriented towards trying to transmit knowledge rather than precise instructions on how to use a product. The information was also considered to be too general, and possibly of use later.

The participants, especially among Francophones, also indicated a strong preference for live radio programs where hosts discuss issues among themselves, and where the public is invited to phone in. The radio is often associated with a presence in the home, a kind of security. Many people said they do not stop and take the time to listen to the radio per se. They can do several things and listen to it at the same time.

« *J'écoute la radio toute la nuit, elle est ouverte même quand je dors.* »

« *I always have it on when I'm doing things around the house.* »

6 - Other Observations

The results presented below were obtained in interviews conducted by COGEM for the Canada Information Office, in May 2000, with 45 less literate Canadians. It should be noted that the following results come from perceptions expressed by participants regarding the material they were given (three types of information: a television ad, printed material, and a radio capsule). In fact, few interview participants could clearly say what would constitute effective communication for them, other than the end result (providing information that meets their needs). Ensuring the relevance and ease of understanding of the information is a challenge more for communicators than for the citizen.

Clear and Simple Language

The use of clear and simple language does not just mean the use of simple words that correspond to a given level of education, but **to a vernacular used and recognized** by participants. Certain participants reacted very strongly and negatively to language that is "*too scientific*", technical or bureaucratic. Others reacted negatively to names of programs that "*were as long as my arm, as if someone wanted to make sure that nobody would understand them*". Moreover, a few participants would have liked to have some words in the presented material explained to them.

In general, the confusion created by the language used and the complexity of the information transmitted resulted not only in the distortion of the message but, in some cases, the rejection of the message in its entirely by the intended audience (in the belief that the message was not intended for them). The interviews suggested that when citizens do not understand, they tend to think the government is not listening to them. By not transmitting useful information, the message is perceived as being arrogant, far removed from the real needs and interests of the participants.

Other Attributes

Apart from adressing the issue of language, the interviews with less literate Canadians made it possible to examine other attributes (text layout and structure, font size, spacing, colour, sound and image quality). It is important to note that studies conducted for Revenue Canada (May 1997) showed not only the necessity of presenting clear and simple information, but also of doing so in a way whereby individuals could accomplish the task they were asked to perform (for example, to fill out a form).

Participants in the interviews experienced **serious difficulty breaking down the information that was given** in order to take advantage of it. *"It is great that the government has lots of programs, but how can I benefit from them?"* Moreover, the information that they received referred more to the results of scientific studies and statistical reports. What participants sought, conversely, was information that they could use in their everyday lives. However, they did express **satisfaction with the organized structure of some information which responded to their needs** (financial help, job search, community work).

It became clear that aspects such as font size, spacing, and colours can all make the information provided easier to understand. Some participants reacted negatively to small print and to too much information in a relatively limited space. They said they liked soft colours and low tones which contrast with the text in written material.

Some participants said they were irritated by the narrator's voice in the audio material. They associated such a voice with a civil servant, someone distant from them, outside their circle of relationship of trust. With respect to television advertising, they indicated being sensitive to images, especially when associated with a child (a theme which is of particular importance to them). This was despite the fact that participants expressed concerns when a story is removed from their personal experience and that of the people around them. Images (primary message) account for a significant part of advertising recall, even before written or oral information (secondary message).

An Example: Canada Child Tax Benefit Application

An example provided by Revenue Canada concerning the form used for the child tax benefit program is particularly interesting as a complementary element in the present study. Revenue Canada sought to examine the characteristics of the form and the tasks needed to fill it out the form. As shown on the form before and after (Table 17), the results are notable.

- Too much information makes the form ambiguous and confusing (before).
- Narrative texts make comprehension difficult (before), while the use of short information segments facilitates understanding (after).

TABLE 17: Canada Child Tax Benefit Application (Before)

Revenue Canada / Revenu Canada

Information protected when completed.

For departmental use only

CHILD TAX BENEFIT APPLICATION

Complete every section of this application that applies to you. Before completing this application, read the *Information Sheet for the Child Tax Benefit Application* included in this package. The information sheet also has more specific explanations for the sections on this application that are marked with an asterisk (*).

Before you can receive the Child Tax Benefit, you and your spouse have to have filed income tax returns.

Section A — Information About You (In most cases, the female parent should complete this section.) *

First name and middle initial | Last name | Social insurance number

Mailing address: Apt. or unit no. | Street | City | Province or territory | Country | Postal code

Home address (if different from above) | Home telephone number ( ) | Work telephone number ( )

Has your address changed since you last contacted Revenue Canada? ☐ Yes ☐ No — If yes, on what date did you move? Year Month Day

Last name at birth (if different from above) | Date of birth Year Month Day | Sex ☐ F ☐ M | Language of correspondence ☐ English ☐ French

What is your current marital status? *

1 ☐ Married 2 ☐ Common-law 3 ☐ Widowed 4 ☐ Divorced 5 ☐ Separated (90 days or more) 6 ☐ Single

If you are not single, provide the date your current marital status began: * Year Month Day

If you are married or living common-law, have you had periods of separation (90 days or more) from your current spouse in past years? * ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you are a Canadian citizen, provide the date you became a Canadian citizen:

Since birth ☐ Yes or Year Month Day

If you became a Canadian citizen within the last 12 months, or if you are not a Canadian citizen, refer to **Section D** on page 3.

Have you been absent from Canada in the past two years? (exclude vacations) * ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes, provide:

- the latest date you left Canada Year Month Day
- the latest date you returned to Canada Year Month Day
- the last Canadian province or territory in which you lived before you left Canada
- your world income in Section E – Statement of World Income

Section B — Information About Your Spouse
(Complete this section about your spouse if you are married, living common-law, or have been separated for less than 90 days.)

First name and middle initial | Last name | Social insurance number

Mailing address (if different from applicant's above): Apt. or unit no. | Street | City

Province or territory | Country | Postal code | Home telephone number ( ) | Work telephone number ( )

Has your spouse's address changed since your spouse last contacted Revenue Canada? ☐ Yes ☐ No — If yes, on what date did your spouse move? Year Month Day

Last name at birth (if different from above) | Date of birth Year Month Day | Sex ☐ F ☐ M | Language of correspondence ☐ English ☐ French

If your spouse is a Canadian citizen, provide the date your spouse became a Canadian citizen:

Since birth ☐ Yes or Year Month Day

If your spouse became a Canadian citizen within the last 12 months, or if your spouse is not a Canadian citizen, refer to **Section D** on page 3.

Has your spouse been absent from Canada in the past two years? (exclude vacations) ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes, provide:

- the latest date your spouse left Canada Year Month Day
- the latest date your spouse returned to Canada Year Month Day
- the last Canadian province or territory in which your spouse lived before your spouse left Canada
- your spouse's world income in Section E – Statement of World Income

RC66 E (97) (Ce formulaire existe aussi en français.) 3733 Canada

TABLE 17: Canada Child Tax Benefit Application (After)

Revenue Canada Revenu Canada

CANADA CHILD TAX BENEFIT APPLICATION

The Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) is a tax-free monthly payment provided to qualified families to help them with the cost of raising children under age 18. You can find more information about the CCTB in the pamphlet called *Your Canada Child Tax Benefit*, included in your CCTB package.

You have to complete this application form to apply for the CCTB. You may also have to complete one or more of the schedules included in your package. Your application will tell you when you need to complete a schedule.

This application is also used to calculate benefits and credits under certain related provincial and territorial child benefit and credit programs that Revenue Canada administers.

You and your spouse each have to file an income tax and benefit return each year, to start receiving or to continue receiving the CCTB, even if you have no income to report.

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Part 1 – Information about you (Generally, this part relates to the mother.)

First name and initials

Last name

Last name at birth (if different from last name above)

Mailing address:
Street (including apt. or unit no.) City
Province or territory Country Postal code

Home address (if different from above):
Street (including apt. or unit no.) City
Province or territory Country Postal code

Social insurance number

Date of birth
Year Month Day

☐ Female ☐ Male

Language of correspondence
☐ English ☐ Français

Telephone no. (at home) Area code
Telephone no. (at work) Area code

If you moved to this address within the last 12 months, enter the date you moved. Year Month Day

If the move was from a different province or territory, enter the name of your previous province or territory.

Are you a Canadian citizen?

☐ Yes If *yes*, and you became a Canadian citizen within the last 12 months, complete Schedule 2, and see the note below.
If *yes*, and you became a Canadian citizen more than 12 months ago, see the note below.

☐ No If *no*, complete Schedule 3, and see the note below.

Note: Complete and attach these schedules if they apply to you.

- Complete Schedules 3 and 5 if, within the last 2 years, you have become a new or a returning resident of Canada.
- Complete Schedules 4 and 5 if you were previously a resident of Canada, you left Canada to live in another country, and you have returned to reside in Canada within the last 2 years.

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- The use of coloured text on a white background makes the form hard to read (before), while the right use of colours and contrasts makes it attractive (after).
  - In this respect, a study[16] showed that the level of comprehension diminishes radically with the use of colours. More than 75% of readers questioned in this study found that very intense colours (such as red) are difficult to read, since the lines can be confused and readers lose concentration.
  - A great majority expressed a preference for black and white.
- Small font size overloads the form, making it hard to read and understand (before).
  - As a result of studies conducted in 1991 by the Literacy Secretariat, the Communications Branch of Revenue Canada[17] recommended a minimum 10 point font size for the general population and 12 point for seniors.
  - For persons who have difficulty reading, it is preferable to use an even larger font size (14 point).
- When the words are written in upper-case, the text appears rectangular and more difficult to recognize (before). When words are written in lowercase, they have distinct forms that can be recognized more easily (after).

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[16] *For Comprehension, Use Any Color As Long As It's Black*, PR Report, vol. 39, September 1996.

[17] *Simple and Clear Language*, Communications Branch, Revenue Canada, February 1997.

7 - Conclusion

In conclusion, less literate people have more difficulty than other Canadians understanding information provided by the Government of Canada. Less literate Canadians are also more likely to look upon government information as not meeting to their needs. They have difficulty extracting, understanding, and using the information they receive. This situation influences various aspects of their everyday lives: they are more critical of government and more pessimistic about their future and that of the country; they contact governmental authorities less frequently; they know little about initiatives taken by the government and depend more on people close to them to find out what is happening. Furthermore, a large number simply do not know the topics about which they could be more informed. That they would not know is hardly surprising, considering that they are unaware that a service exists. It is up to the Government of Canada to make the effort to inform them. Their needs will not be met without a proactive approach on the part of the government to end their isolation.

The interviews conducted across the country cast a new qualitative light on the communication problems that less literate Canadians face on a daily basis. They are favourable and more receptive to various forms of government information. They seek information that attracts them, meaning issues that affect them on a daily basis and personal testimonials that serve as a mechanism of proof. They want to be addressed in language that they can understand, in a direct, practical manner focussed on getting results. They seek information that not only reflects their individual life experiences, but also fits in with their lifestyles. They are frequent television viewers, especially in the evening, and radio listeners in the morning. They prefer direct contact in person or by telephone, if possible always with the same person. They want a single point of contact who is reliable and who empathizes with their concerns. They are more interested in receiving information by mail which is personally addressed to them and thus raises the question "*why are they sending this to me?*"

It is clear that the Government has not succeeded in providing information which meets to their needs, and which is easy to understand and appropriate. As such, the Government of Canada will have to go to greater lengths to adapt its communications to the particular needs of this important segment of the population so that they too can benefit from the services that are available to them.

Appendix - A

International Adult Literacy Survey

In terms of statistics on adult literacy in Canada, the best source is unquestionably the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)[18] conducted by Statistics Canada in 1994 and sponsored by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Applied Research Branch of Human Resources Development Canada. The study was managed by Statistics Canada in cooperation with the OECD, Eurostat and UNESCO. The results of the Canadian component were published in September 1996.

The Canadian report on the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey paints a detailed statistical portrait of literacy in Canada and sheds light on the advantages and consequences of literacy in our society.

Socio-demographic profile

From the outset, it is important to point out that it is impossible to characterize Canadians with low literacy skills. They include men and women of all ages and backgrounds, from all levels of society and all regions of Canada.

Having said that, the IALS made it possible to identify some of the socio-demographic characteristics of this group of individuals in Canada. For example, generally speaking, there are larger numbers of adults with high skill levels in Western Canada, and larger numbers with low skill levels in the Atlantic region. Moreover, literacy levels tend to be lower among certain groups of people, such as those with less education, older Canadians and immigrants.

General statistics

4.7 million Canadian adults, or 22% of the adult population in Canada, have very low literacy skills; in other words, their skills are at level 1[19]. Individuals in this category are difficult and sometimes even impossible to reach using printed material (newspapers, magazines, books, advertising, brochures, written instructions, dosages on medicine bottles, etc.). Moreover, they need assistance in performing other tasks and operations that require reading and/or writing.

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[18]Conducted in eight countries including Canada, the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey was the first multi-country and multi-language assessment of adult literacy.

[19]Levels 1 and 2 correspond to the lowest literacy levels on a scale of one (1) to five (5). The only way to determine an individual's level is by using tests that accurately measure his or her skills in terms of prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy.

5.5 million Canadian adults, or 26% of the adult population in Canada, have low literacy skills; in other words, their skills are at level 2. Individuals in this category are poor readers and are comfortable only when given simply written texts dealing with a single topic or idea. Many people in this category also require assistance in performing other tasks involving reading and/or writing.

As a group, Canadian adults who *have no, very few* or *few* literacy skills make up 48% of the adult population in Canada, or represent 10.2 million people.

Literacy and educational attainment

Literacy and the level of academic training are closely linked. A low level of educational attainment generally leads to poor reading and writing skills, as shown in Table A.1.

The vast majority of Canadians with less than a grade 8 education are at level 1. Among those who completed some secondary schooling, a strong majority (61%) are at levels 1 and 2. As for secondary school graduates, 43% are at levels 1 and 2.

Having said that, according to Statistics Canada: "Education does not 'fix' literacy forever." In fact, 20% of Canadians have low literacy skills even though they have a high level of education. At the same time, 16% have high literacy skills even though they have a low level of education.

TABLEAU A.1 : DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY BY LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

	% of Canadian adults by literacy level				
Highest level of education	**1**	**2**	**1+2**	**3**	**4/5**
Less than Grade 8	89	9	98	---	---
Completed primary school	59	29	88	12	---
Some secondary school	25	36	61	32	7
Secondary school graduate	12	31	43	40	18
Community college graduate	7	23	30	45	25
University graduate	---	11	11	33	56

Source: Statistics Canada, IALS, Catalogue no. 89-551-XPE, 1996.

Literacy and regional distribution in Canada

There is considerable variation in Canadians' literacy skills and that variation differs by region. Generally, there are larger numbers of adults with high skill levels in the western provinces, and larger numbers with low skill levels in the east, as indicated in Table A.2.

TABLEAU A.2 : DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY SKILLS BY REGION AND SELECTED PROVINCES OF CANADA

	% of Canadian adults by literacy level				
Regions of Canada	**1**	**2**	**1+2**	**3**	**4/5**
Atlantic provinces	25	26	51	35	15
Quebec	28	26	54	39	8
Ontario	19	28	47	28	25
Western provinces[20]	18	24	42	34	25
CANADA	22	26	48	33	20

Source: Statistics Canada, IALS, Catalogue no. 89-551-XPE, 1996.

Literacy and age

In general, larger proportions of older Canadians have low literacy skills (see Table A.3), especially those without any secondary schooling.

38% of Canadians aged 56 to 65 and 53% of those 65 and older are at level 1. Compared to other age groups, fewer Canadians aged 56 and older are at levels 4 and 5. At the same time, the youngest three age groups (those aged 16 to 45) have a relatively small proportion at level 1, reflecting their generally high educational attainment.

[20]Comprend la Colombie-Britannique, l'Alberta, la Saskatchewa et le Manitoba.

TABLEAU A.3 : DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY BY AGE					
	% of Canadian adults by literacy level				
Age group	**1**	**2**	**1+2**	**3**	**4/5**
16 to 25	11	26	37	44	20
26 to 35	12	29	41	33	26
36 to 45	13	19	32	37	31
46 to 55	21	30	51	31	18
56 to 65	38	26	64	28	8
Over 65	53	27	80	19	--

Source: Statistics Canada, IALS, Catalogue no. 89-551-XPE, 1996.

Literacy and first language

More Canadians whose first language is French have low literacy skills than Canadians whose first language is English (see Table A.4). In fact, 54% of all Francophones in Canada have low literacy skills. The breakdown is 52% of Francophones in Quebec and 63% of Francophones outside Quebec.

TABLEAU A.4 : DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY BY RESPONDENT'S FIRST LANGUAGE					
	% of Canadian adults by literacy level				
First language	**1**	**2**	**1+2**	**3**	**4/5**
English	19	26	45	31	24
French	28	26	54	38	9
• In Quebec	27	25	52	39	9
• Outside Quebec	33	30	63	25	---

Source: Statistics Canada, IALS, Catalogue no. 89-551-XPE, 1996.

Literacy and immigration

The proportion of immigrants with low literacy skills is larger than the proportion of those born in Canada. 59% of Canadian immigrants are at level 1 or 2, compared to 45% of people born in Canada (see Table A.5). No other country studied has as large a proportion of immigrants at level 4 or 5 as Canada. According to Statistics Canada, this phenomenon reflects the policy of selecting skilled immigrants which the Canadian government has traditionally followed. Having said that, large numbers of immigrants are at level 1, reflecting the fact that Canada has accepted large numbers of immigrants on humanitarian grounds.

TABLEAU A.5 : DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY BY IMMIGRANT STATUS

	% of Canadians adults by literacy level				
Born in Canada?	**1**	**2**	**1+2**	**3**	**4/5**
YES	18	27	45	37	19
NO	36	23	59	19	22

Source: Statistics Canada, IALS, Catalogue no. 89-551-XPE, 1996.

Literacy and employment

The majority of Canadians read mostly at work; in this, Canada is no different from other countries. Therefore, individuals who are unemployed are less likely to read than those who are at work or in school. This lack of reading practice is a problem for many unemployed people, as Table A.6 shows. About three times as many unemployed Canadians are at level 1, compared to those who are employed.

TABLEAU A.6 : DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS					
	% of Canadian adults by literacy level				
Current employment status	**1**	**2**	**1+2**	**3**	**4/5**
Employed	12	25	37	37	26
Unemployed	33	23	56	36	9
Student	12	23	35	40	26
Retired	49	28	77	19	5
Homemakers	27	28	55	28	18
Other, out of labour force	43	35	78	19	---

Source: Statistics Canada, IALS, Catalogue no. 89-551-XPE, 1996.

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